

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2021
ASH WEDNESDAY
PSALM 51 – DUST

EVERY YEAR, THE SEASIN OF LENT POSES THE ULTIMATE QUESTION – “HOW IS IT WITH YOU AND THE LORD?” AND WE, WHO LIKE TO BE IN CONTROL, ARE GIVEN A SMUDGE ON OUR FOREHEAD TO REMIND US THAT WE ARE NOT.

SEE, WE TRY NOT TO THINK ABOUT DEATH TOO MUCH, BUT THIS SMUDGE ON MY FOREHEAD IS A REMINDER THAT MY BANK ACCOUNT, MY REPUTATION, MY SKILL, MY GOOD HEALTH, MY ACTS OF DEVOTION – NONE OF THAT CAN REMOVE THE SPECTOR OF DEATH FROM MY LIFE. OR YOURS. THIS SMUDGE OF ASH LEADS US TO THE QUESTION OF ETERNITY...

“SO HOW IS IT WITH YOU AND THE LORD?” YOU AND I HAVE THIS TENDENCY, NOT ONLY TO DENY DEATH, BUT IN BREAKING GOD’S COMMANDS, WE ALSO **DENY LIFE** WITH AMAZING REGULARITY. LENT CALLS YOU AND ME TO SINCERELY EXAMINE OUR HEARTS, THAT WE MIGHT COMPARE OURSELVES – NOT TO FRIENDS OR NEIGHBORS OR EVEN FELLOW DISCIPLES, BUT TO CHRIST JESUS.

“HOW IS IT WITH YOU AND THE LORD?” IT’S NOT AN EASY QUESTION TO ASK, BECAUSE YOU NEED TO BE READY FOR THE ANSWER.

WE READ PSALM 51 TONIGHT. THIS PSALM IS KING DAVID’S ATTEMPT TO COME TO TERMS WITH HIS ENEMY. NOW DAVID’S ENEMY IS NOT SOME NEIGHBORING TRIBE. HIS ENEMY IS NOT SOME INVADING NATION. INSTEAD, DAVID IS AT WAR WITH HIMSELF. HIS IS AN INNER BATTLE OF RIGHT AND WRONG, SIN AND GUILT – MUCH LIKE THE BATTLES YOU AND I FIGHT EVERY DAY. AND FOR DAVID, IT’S A LOSING BATTLE.

DAVID LOST HIS BATTLE WITH LUST WHEN HE SAW THE BEAUTIFUL BATHSHEBA, BATHING ON A ROOFTOP. HE LOST A SECOND BATTLE AS LUST GAVE WAY TO ADULTERY, AND HE LOST A THIRD BATTLE AS ADULTERY GAVE WAY TO MURDER,

AND THE DEATH OF BATHSHEBA'S HUSBAND. THE PROPHET, NATHAN, HAS SKILLFULLY CONFRONTED DAVID WITH HIS SIN. AND NOW DAVID IS FORCED TO ANSWER THE QUESTION, "HOW IS IT WITH ME AND THE LORD?"

KING DAVID COMES TO A CROSS-ROAD IN HIS LIFE, WITH THE DUST OF SIN AND GUILT BLOWING HARD AGAINST HIM, STINGING HIS CONSCIENCE AND MAKING HIS LIFE A GRITTY - MESS. IN HIS SELFISH PURSUIT OF PLEASURE, DAVID HAS TRAVELLED DOWN A PATH WHICH HAS TAKEN HIM FAR FROM GOD. HE KNOWS HE CANNOT CONTINUE DOWN THIS PAINFUL ROAD. SO, HE TURNS AROUND – AND TURNS BACK TO GOD IN AN ACT OF REPENTANCE.

PSALM 51 IS DAVID'S PRAYER. BUT IT IS OUR PRAYER TOO. FOR LIKE DAVID WE HAVE A PROBLEM. THE PROBLEM BECOMES OBVIOUS AS DAVID PLEADS WITH THE LORD. "BLOT OUT MY TRANSGRESSIONS." TO TRANSGRESS MEANS TO GO BEYOND THE LIMITS GOD HAS SET. LIKE ADAM AND EVE WHEN THEY ATE THE FRUIT OF THE FORBIDDEN TREE. TO TRANSGRESS IS TO BREAK GOD'S COMMANDMENTS, TO CROSS THE LINE. "BLOT OUT MY TRANSGRESSIONS," DAVID PLEADS. THE HEBREW WORD HERE DESCRIBES A PROCESS INVOLVING ANCIENT LEATHER SCROLLS. WHEN WRITING HAD TO BE REMOVED FROM ANCIENT SCROLLS, IT WAS NOT JUST A MATTER OF GETTING AN ERASER OUT. A PERSON HAD TO LITERALLY SCRUB SO HARD THAT THE TOP LAYER OF THE LEATHER CAME OFF.

DAVID IS SAYING, "GOD, SCRUB OUT ALL THOSE TIMES WHEN I DID WHAT YOU FORBID. SCRUB THEM RIGHT OFF THE BOOKS."

THE SECOND PICTURE DAVID PAINTS IS JUST AS VIVID. HE SAYS, "WASH AWAY MY INIQUITY." AGAIN, THE WORDS TELL A STORY. WHEN A PERSON WITH LEPROSY TOUCHED SOMEONE ELSE'S CLOTHING, PEOPLE WOULD SCRUB THESE CLOTHES THREE OR FOUR TIMES TO GET ALL THE GERMS OFF. "WASH AWAY MY INIQUITY." THE HEBREW WORD FOR INIQUITY IS GUILT.

GUILT IS LIKE THE RED ENGINE LIGHT THAT LIGHTS UP THE DASHBOARD OF YOUR CAR. WHEN THE LIGHT COMES ON, IT'S TELLING YOU THAT YOU HAVE TO DO SOMETHING – YOU IGNORE IT AT YOUR PERIL. GUILT IS A WARNING THAT SOMETHING IS WRONG IN OUR HEART.

SO HOW IS IT WITH YOU AND THE LORD? PERHAPS DAVID SPEAKS FOR US ALL WHEN HE SAYS, “FOR I KNOW MY TRANSGRESSIONS, AND MY SIN IS EVER BEFORE ME. DAVID’S SIN HAUNTS HIM. AND FOR EACH OF US, THERE ARE THOSE SINS, THOSE TRANSGRESSIONS THAT WE REMEMBER ALL TOO WELL. IS IT THE HURTFUL THINGS THAT COME OUT OF YOUR MOUTH THAT YOU WANT TO TAKE BACK, BUT CAN’T? IS IT THE BETRAYAL OF A TRUST? THE BITTERNESS OF REGRET FOR THE THINGS YOU’VE LEFT UNDONE? ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, THE SINS WE COMMIT ARE ALWAYS BEFORE US.

BUT IT GETS WORSE – “SURELY I WAS SINFUL AT BIRTH, SINFUL FROM THE TIME MY MOTHER CONCEIVED ME,” DAVID CONFESSES. FAR FROM MAKING EXCUSES, DAVID IS SAYING THAT HE CAN’T REMEMBER A TIME WHEN SIN DID NOT HAVE HIM IN ITS GRIP. CAN YOU? NO ONE NEEDS TO TEACH A CHILD HOW TO BE SELFISH OR GREEDY. INSTEAD, WE HAVE TO TEACH THEM HOW TO SHARE.

AS IF TO SEAL OUR FATE, DAVID ADDS ONE MORE LINE, “AGAINST YOU ONLY HAVE I SINNED AND DONE WHAT IS EVIL IN YOUR SIGHT.” WHEN IT COMES RIGHT DOWN TO IT, ALL SIN IS AGAINST GOD. WE STAND BEFORE GOD AS INDIVIDUALS. IT DOESN’T MATTER WHAT FAMILY WE COME FROM, OR HOW OFTEN WE WORSHIP, OR WHAT WE PUT IN THE OFFERING PLATE. NONE OF THAT WILL PUT A DENT IN THE WALL THAT SEPARATES US FROM OUR CREATOR.

WITH DAVID, WE FALL TO OUR KNEES BECAUSE WE HAVE A PROBLEM. BUT HERE’S THE THING – WE FALL TO OUR KNEES ALSO, BECAUSE WE HAVE A PROMISE. NOTICE THAT THE ASHES ON YOUR HEAD, WHICH SIGNIFY SIN AND DEATH ARE MADE IN THE SIGN OF A CROSS – THE SIGN OF LIFE AND HOPE. DAVID SAYS “WASH ME WITH HYSSOP AND I WILL BE CLEAN; WASH ME AND I WILL BE WHITER THAN SNOW.” BY FAITH, DAVID IS GRASPING GOD’S PROMISE.

HE'S SAYING "UN-SIN ME. UN-SIN ME WITH HYSSOP." HYSSOP IS A SMALL TREE THAT WAS USED BY PRIESTS UNDER THE OLD COVENANT. WITH ITS BRANCHES, THEY WOULD SPRINKLE BLOOD ON LAMBS, WHICH WERE SACRIFICED TO ATONE FOR THE SINS OF THE PEOPLE. EVERY TIME A SIN WAS COMMITTED, A LAMB HAD TO BE SACRIFICED AGAIN THIS WAY.

UNDER THE NEW COVENANT THE TREE BECOMES A CROSS, THE SACRIFICE BECOMES THE LAMB OF GOD WHO TAKES AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD ONCE AND FOR ALL. AND THE BLOOD BECOMES A SACRAMENT OF HOPE AND PROMISE FOR ALL TO DRINK. THROUGH THE SACRIFICE OF JESUS ON THE CROSS, WE ARE WASHED CLEAN.

"HIDE YOUR FACE FROM MY SIN," DAVID PRAYS. AND THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT GOD DOES. "AS FAR AS THE EAST IS FROM THE WEST, SO FAR HE REMOVES OUR SINS FROM US." HE THROWS OUR SINS IN THE FARTHEST REACHES OF THE SEA, AND THEN DECLARES IT OFF LIMITS. SO, WHEN YOU AND I ARE PLAGUED BY OUR PAST, IT ISN'T GOD WHO IS ACCUSING US, BUT THE EVIL ONE. THAT'S WHY WE HAVE TO KEEP COMING BACK TO THIS PLACE, TO HEAR OVER AND OVER AGAIN THE WORDS OF ABSOLUTION.

WE SOMETIMES SING "CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART OH GOD AND RENEW A RIGHT SPIRIT WITHIN ME." THE PROBLEM IS THAT SOMEHOW, WE TELL OURSELVES THAT WE DON'T MEASURE UP, THAT WE HAVE TO GO AND DO BETTER THIS WEEK. THAT THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR BEING HOLY AND LIVING RIGHTLY IS PLACED SQUARELY ON OUR SHOULDERS. A BURDEN, THAT IN OUR FALLEN NATURE, WE SIMPLY CANNOT BEAR.

SEE, IF I COULD DO BETTER ON MY OWN STEAM, THEN WHY IN THE WORLD WOULD I NEED A SAVIOR? IF I COULD DO BETTER BY MY OWN WILL POWER, THEN WHY DID JESUS HAVE TO DIE? IT'S WHY THE NT PUTS IT THIS WAY – THESE WORDS SHOULD SOUND FAMILIAR; "IF WE CONFESS OUR SIN, HE WHO IS FAITHFUL AND JUST WILL FORGIVE OUR SIN AND CLEANSE US FROM ALL UNRIGHTEOUSNESS." (1 JOHN 1:9)

DAVID RIGHTLY UNDERSTANDS THAT IT IS GOD WHO CREATES AND GOD WHO FORGIVES, AND GOD WHO RENEWS. A CLEAN HEART AND A RIGHT SPIRIT ARE GIFTS FROM ABOVE. THE ABILITY TO TURN BACK – TO REPENT AS DAVID DID IS A GIFT! THE ABILITY TO RECEIVE WHAT IS PROMISED AT THE DUSTY CROSS-ROADS OF OUR OWN LIVES ... IS A GIFT. AWAKENED TO THIS GIFT OF GRACE, WE FIND OURSELVES ON THE RIGHT PATH AGAIN. AWAKENED TO THIS GIFT OF GRACE, WE ARE WELL-EQUIPPED TO ANSWER WITH CONFIDENCE THE QUESTION THAT LENT POSES... **“HOW IS IT WITH YOU AND THE LORD?”** AMEN.